


ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# The functions of natural theology in Thomas Aquinas: A presumption of atheism?

Clemente Huneeus 

Centro de Estudios Generales, Universidad de los Andes, Las Condes, Chile  
Email: [chuneeus@miuandes.cl](mailto:chuneeus@miuandes.cl)

(Received 29 November 2022; revised 5 June 2023; accepted 7 June 2023)

## Abstract

Antony Flew argued for a ‘presumption of atheism’ that intended to put the philosophical debate about God under a light which demands setting the meaningfulness and logical coherence of the theistic notion of ‘God’ before any arguments for His existence are suggested. This way of proceeding, discussing divine attributes before considering the arguments for the existence of God, became dominant in analytic philosophy of religion. Flew also stated that Aquinas presented his five ways as an attempt to defeat such a presumption of atheism. However, Aquinas proceeds in the reverse order, beginning with God’s existence before discussing the divine attributes. He does so because he believes that natural knowledge of God must be drawn from creatures. Accordingly, from the Thomist perspective, natural theology is necessary not because it provides rational justification for religious belief in God’s existence, but rather as a means to fix the referent for the word ‘God’ (semantic function) and provide an intelligible account of the divine nature (hermeneutic function). We should also acknowledge a correlative hermeneutic function of religious faith. Therefore, natural theology should not begin from a presumption of atheism nor proceed in the way suggested by Flew, because its main intention is not strictly apologetical.

**Keywords:** Antony Flew; Thomas Aquinas; presumption of atheism; natural theology; religious epistemology

A brief look at the index of standard introductions to analytic philosophy of religion shows that the customary order of exposition is as follows:<sup>1</sup>

- (1) *Attributes/existence*: (i) The coherence of the divine attributes commonly held in classical theism is discussed; (ii) various rational arguments are presented to justify or increase the level of warrant for the belief that such a ‘God’ does indeed exist.

On the other hand, texts of a Thomist inspiration tend to use the reverse order,<sup>2</sup> which also featured in the *Summa Theologiae*, the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, and the *Compendium Theologiae*.<sup>3</sup>

- (2) *Existence/attributes*: (i) Proofs that God exists drawn from His created effects are laid out; (ii) an account of the divine attributes fitting the result of the initial demonstrations is given.

This contrast is not casual; both approaches reflect different purposes. (1) assumes that establishing the logical coherence of the theistic notion of 'God' is a prerequisite for rational assessment of the arguments claiming an application for such a concept, whereas (2) assumes that to settle the coherence and intelligibility of the theistic notion of 'God', we must begin with the arguments that lead us to posit God in the first place. Approach (1) makes sense in the cultural context of what Wolterstorff (1986) calls 'enlightenment evidentialism'. Modern Western intellectuals think that, without good reasons to defend them, theistic beliefs must be abandoned. To meet this challenge, many Christian philosophers assume some of the traditional arguments of medieval theology, unconsciously migrating them from their original metaphysical context to that of an 'evidentialist apologetics', subjecting religion to strong scrutiny by the court of reason alone. This leads us to view natural theology as a forensic debate between theists and atheists, obviously not how a medieval figure such as Aquinas would have seen it. There is nothing wrong with apologetics, but assuming that natural theology must necessarily be conceived under this modern framework, and consequently reading authors such as Aquinas from that optic, may lead to misunderstandings.<sup>4</sup> It means assigning the five ways a purpose they never had, and then declaring the arguments unsuccessful because they do not achieve such an anachronistic objective.

But what, then, was the purpose Aquinas had in mind? What underlying project can make sense of approach (2)? Aquinas was not using his arguments to overthrow a 'presumption of atheism', but this does not render his natural theology superfluous. On the contrary, my reading is that the purpose of a Thomist natural theology is both more humble and more fundamental. The former, because Aquinas' task is not to convince open-minded atheists that the Christian believer has sufficient evidence or warrant to believe that God exists without violating any epistemic duties, but simply to open a philosophical horizon within which the question of God can be coherently considered.<sup>5</sup> And the latter because, from Aquinas' perspective, the absolute failure of rational arguments to demonstrate that God exists would not result in a mere loss of rational justification for religious beliefs but would make the very notion of 'God' unintelligible.

This suggestion seems risky, but it is not unprecedented. For example, Rudi Te Velde (2006) claims that Aquinas' aim in the initial questions of ST is to use philosophy to provide a metaphysical account of God in order for the contents of faith to become intelligible. The fundamentally interpretative function of the ways is also defended by Lubor Velecky (1994) and (1974), although he goes as far as denying that they can properly constitute proofs of God's existence. Similarly, David Burrell (1979) developed the more extreme thesis that Aquinas' natural theology is essentially apophatic, and his claims about the divine essence should not be read as metaphysical descriptions but only as a 'grammar *in divinis*'. Gregory Rocca (2004) also describes Thomistic analogy as a 'web of judgement', where the meaning of 'God' depends on the interplay of crucial truths about the divine, which can be achieved through both philosophical argument and revelation. The interpretation developed in the following pages draws heavily on the contributions of these scholars, though it also conflicts with some of their claims.

The first part of this article presents Antony Flew's ideas regarding the presumption of atheism and his case for attributing it to Aquinas, followed by a summary of my interpretation of the functions of natural theology in Aquinas's project. The central sections will show that Aquinas engages with proofs of God's existence to open a discussion regarding God's nature, and he is therefore not exactly overthrowing a presumption of atheism, but rather assigning a semantic and a hermeneutic function to natural theology. With all this in mind, the final section returns to Flew's claims and sketches the senses in which faith and natural theology are mutually dependent and independent.

### The presumption of atheism and the necessity of natural theology

Flew argued that the theist should 'begin his defense at the beginning', addressing questions 'concerning the consistency, applicability, and legitimacy of the very concept of God' (Flew (2005), 39). Only by dealing with these preliminary issues can we reasonably discuss the force of alleged proofs of God's existence. Otherwise, Flew feared that the theist would be tempted to interpret the conceptual inconsistencies and absurdities arising from a misconstrued human concept as 'very profound, though humanly barely intelligible, discoveries about the nature of God' (Flew (2005), 39). This would be a serious mistake: 'if any contradictions or absurdities can be derived from that concept, they have to be construed as indices of the unintelligibility or incoherence of a wholly human concept, and not revered as inscrutable mysteries of the Divine Nature' (Flew (2005), 42).

Accordingly, Flew (1972) argued that theists would do well to begin their natural theology from a methodological presumption of atheism, analogous to the presumption of innocence in criminal procedures. The idea could be stated like this:

- (3) *The presumption of atheism*: In the debate between theism and atheism, the onus of proof must lie on the theist, who, by presenting relevant evidence, can still defeat the said presumption and establish the existence of God.

(3) is not a denial of the metaphysical possibility that there is such a thing as God (which would be positive atheism), but neither does it grant from the very beginning the possibility in question (which would only be agnosticism). What must be presumed in the rational philosophical debate is simply non-theism or purely negative atheism. Thus, the proper effect of (3) is to force the defender of the theistic position to (i) introduce the concept of 'God' and defend its logical consistency, and (ii) provide sufficient reason to think that this concept indeed has an application. 'The theist . . . is required to begin absolutely from the beginning; and this absolute beginning is to ensure that the word "God" is provided with a meaning such that it is theoretically possible for an actual being to be so described' (Flew (1972), 32). That is, if (3) is accepted, the rational discussion should follow order (1) – attributes/existence: begin with the problems related to logical coherence, and only then proceed to look for positive arguments in favour of the existence of God.

In an attempt to 'draw attention to something which seems generally to be overlooked, and by so doing to summon a massive authority in support of a thesis which many apparently find scandalous', Flew argued that Aquinas would have granted the presumption of atheism, and that his famous five ways are presented as 'an attempt to defeat just such a presumption' (Flew (1972), 43). Flew's main textual basis for this exegesis is ST I, q. 2, a. 3, obj. 2, where Aquinas considers the possibility of an atheist naturalism, within which 'God' is explanatorily superfluous: 'What can be accounted for by fewer principles must not be explained by resorting to more. But it seems that, supposing there were no God, everything we see in the world could be accounted for by other principles . . . Therefore, there is no need to posit that God exists'.

In support of Flew's reading, it should be noted that Aquinas's response to this objection does not reject the principle of postulational economy stated at the beginning of the argument but claims directly that the world cannot be wholly explained by naturalism. Furthermore, he presents the possibility of an explanatory superfluousness of God as an objection not against His demonstrability, but rather against God's effective existence (otherwise, Aquinas would place this objection in q. 2, a. 2, not in q. 2, a. 3).

But, contrary to Flew's interpretation is the paradox that Aquinas did not draw from his supposed presumption of atheism the methodological consequences Flew is arguing

for: in ST, the solution of logical aporias derived from the divine attributes posited by classical theism is not a previous condition to the study of the arguments showing God exists.<sup>6</sup> Far from that, if the explanatory superfluity of God is a compelling argument against theism, this is so precisely because assuming such superfluity would make any reasonable discussion of divine attributes impossible.

Accordingly, a Thomist might be tempted to grant (3) – the presumption of atheism – but deny that (1) – attributes/existence – is its natural consequence; instead (2) – existence/attributes – is the natural conclusion. However, it is more correct simply to claim that Aquinas never defended (3). He did not see his arguments as a way of defeating any ‘presumption of atheism’, because the purpose of the ways was not to settle a quasi-judicial debate between theists and atheists.

But why, then, does he engage in proving God’s existence? Of course, we could engage in natural theology for its own philosophical sake, regardless of the functions it might have regarding religious belief or revealed theology. Although from the Thomistic perspective, this approach might be possible (e.g. see SBDT q.2 a.2), and could even make sense for a philosopher who does accept any revelation but rationally wonders if there is a divinity at all, it is not the actual approach adopted by Thomas in any of his works. My concern in this article is with the functions natural theology has for a religious believer who recognizes the scientific autonomy of philosophy, but as a matter of fact always pursues it in close connection to divine revelation. I want to argue that, for this believer, natural theology has a crucial function even if (3) is ultimately rejected.

A complete failure in the endeavour to prove that ‘God’ exists would imply a general collapse of Aquinas’s theology. This is what he affirms in SCG I, c. 9, just before his discussion of such demonstrations: ‘Among those things we must consider about God in Himself, we must give the first place, as a foundation for this whole work, to the demonstration that God exists. Without this, the entire consideration of divine things will be annulled.’ So, Aquinas did believe rational arguments for God’s existence to be deeply relevant for theology. He may reject (3), but he does seem to subscribe to the following claim:

- (4) *The necessity of natural theology*: The development of an account of the divine essence by revealed theology is somehow dependent on the development of rational arguments for the existence of God by natural theology.

How do we make sense of such a dependence? What are its implications? We can describe this peculiar function of natural theology by saying that the five ways have relevant semantic and hermeneutical roles. This is notorious in the structure of ST I q.2–26, SCG I, and CT I chs 3–36: Aquinas uses arguments for the existence of God to fix the referent for the word ‘God’ and thus provide an initial characterization that is further developed in the rest of the treatise. For Aquinas, it is not the previous discussion of the divine attributes that conditions the demonstrative value of the arguments. On the contrary, the arguments’ conclusion conditions subsequent discussion of the divine attributes. A better explanation of what is meant by semantic and hermeneutic functions of natural theology will be provided gradually over the following pages, but for the time being, it can be summarized as follows:

- (5) *The semantic function of natural theology*: Arguments for the existence of God beginning with His effects allow us to fix the referent for the word ‘God’.
- (6) *The hermeneutic function of natural theology*: Arguments for the existence of God beginning with His effects have a continuous interpretative role in our account of the divine attributes.

Functions (5) and (6) are closely connected and will frequently be mentioned together. On the other hand, there can also be an apologetic function, described as follows:

- (7) *The apologetic function of natural theology*: Arguments for the existence of God beginning with His effects increase the rational justification or level of warrant for theistic beliefs, producing a greater conviction on the matter when examined open-mindedly.

This article will not deal in detail with this latter function; the objective is neither to defend nor to attack it, but simply to show that (5) and (6) are more fundamental in Aquinas, while (7) should only be seen as an optional by-product.

### The semantic and hermeneutic functions of natural theology in Thomas Aquinas

The semantic and hermeneutic functions of natural theology are connected to some fundamental epistemological assumptions. The central claim can be summarized as follows:

- (8) *The indirectness of our natural knowledge of God*: Human beings cannot have an immediate grasp of the divine essence in the natural order but only an indirect knowledge of God through His created effects.

Aquinas continually reminds us that we cannot have a *quidditative* knowledge of God, that is, no immediate grasp of the divine essence. Accordingly, it cannot strictly be said that we know what God is (*quid sit*). Before beginning to investigate the divine attributes, Aquinas states, 'since we cannot know what God is, but rather only what He is not, we are unable to study how God is, but rather how He is not' (ST I, q. 3, introduction).

This is connected to some central features of Aquinas's epistemology. Roughly following Aristotelian psychology, Aquinas claims that all human knowledge begins with sensory perception. He distinguishes between (i) a sensory knowledge, carried out by corporeal organs, through which we grasp certain accidental forms that determine singular material individuals, and (ii) an intellectual knowledge, which does not *per se* or intrinsically depend on matter (although it does depend on bodily functions *per accidens* or extrinsically, since it presupposes the images provided by our internal senses), and whose specifying object is the essence or *quidditas* (literally 'whatness') of material beings.<sup>7</sup> The point is that, at both levels of our knowledge, the object known is that which exists only in matter. Since God does not fit this description, we cannot have a natural knowledge of the divine essence during the present life state.<sup>8</sup>

But (8) does not imply we cannot have any real natural knowledge of God at all. Aquinas holds we can know with certainty, through discursive reflection starting with the created effects, that God exists. He even claims we can arrive at several conclusions about some of His attributes.

Our natural knowledge begins from the senses. Therefore it can only go as far as it is led, as by the hand, by sensible things. But our intellect cannot be led by sense so far as to achieve a vision of the divine essence, because sensible creatures are effects of God that do not equal the power of their cause . . . However, because they are His effects, and as such, depend on their cause, we can be led from them to know of God 'whether He exists'; and to know of Him that which necessarily belongs to Him as the first cause of all things, exceeding all things caused by Him. (ST I, q. 12, a. 12)

The consequence is that, for Aquinas, God cannot be known by the human intellect outside creation. Whatever we know and say about God depends on what created beings reveal to us about the Creator.

Reaching at least a vague understanding of how 'God' can be the ultimate cause of the objects presented to us by the senses is essential to grasping the meaning of that word. As long as our understanding of the explanatory and causal function God fulfils towards us is loose, so will be our notion of 'God'. But if we equip ourselves with philosophical reflection in order to attain a more specific account of the place God should have in our comprehension of the world, we will also be progressively unfolding a more precise knowledge of the divine essence and attributes (but only insofar as these are manifested by creatures). This is what is meant by (5) and (6) – the semantic and hermeneutic functions of natural theology – and also the ultimate ground for claim (4) – the necessity of natural theology.

Let us take a closer look at (5) – the semantic function of natural theology. Certainly, Aquinas's ways cannot be considered strict demonstrations in an Aristotelian sense since, according to the methodology proposed in the *Posterior Analytics*, scientific demonstrations must use the essence of the demonstrated subject as their middle term.<sup>9</sup> 'The middle term of demonstration is the essence or "whatness". But we cannot know God's whatness . . . Therefore we cannot demonstrate that God exists' (ST I, q. 2, a. 2, obj. 2).<sup>10</sup> Aquinas's answer to this objection is especially instructive for our purposes:

When the cause is demonstrated by its effect, it is necessary for the effect to take the place of the cause's definition, in order to prove that cause's existence. And this is especially the case in regard to God, because in order to prove the existence of something, it is necessary to take as a middle term 'what the name means' and not 'what it is' – for the question of 'what it is' follows on the question 'does it exist?' Now, the names given to God are based on His effects, as we will show later. Hence, in order to demonstrate God's existence from His effects, we can take for the middle what is meant by the name 'God'. (ST I, q. 2, a. 2, ad 2)

The final statement regarding 'what is meant by the name' or nominal definition for the word 'God' introduces an empirical and sociological problem, since arriving at a nominal definition requires examination of the common use given to certain words. Now, 'God' is not an artificial word invented by scholars positing a certain metaphysical theory with the sole purpose of naming certain unknown entities it features; it belongs to ordinary language, its everyday use preceding any philosophical account for the explanatory functions 'God' must fulfil within a metaphysical theory. Does this prevent us from conceiving metaphysics – and specifically natural theology – as that setting through which the meaning of the word is fixed and the conceptual horizon which makes the notion intelligible is articulated? Certainly not. Rather, what this tells us is that 'the question of God', that is, the class of problems in whose explanation divinity intervenes, is something felt vaguely by human consciousness since its most primitive stages. As long as Aquinas's ways manage to specify this explanatory function of 'God', they are providing the required definition.<sup>11</sup>

Instead of discussing the nominal definition of God in the same q. 2, Aquinas deals with this problem much later in ST; the aforementioned definition only appears in I, q. 13, a. 8. To demonstrate the existence of 'God', the exact meaning given to this name must be temporarily bracketed, since we need the conceptual horizon given by the ways themselves and subsequent unfolding of God's essential attributes in order to further determine this meaning.<sup>12</sup> In fact, when addressing this problem, Aquinas will be quite brief and almost incidental:

Since God is not known to us in His nature but is made known to us by His operations or effects, it is from these that we can name Him. Therefore, the name 'God' is a

name of operation, insofar as relates to that from which it was imposed to signify. For this name was imposed from His universal providence over all things; since all those who talk about God intend to name as 'God' that which has a universal providence over things. (ST I, q. 13, a. 8)<sup>13</sup>

Providence is the particular effect of God on creation Aquinas associates with the primary imposition of the name, but he adds that the same name later began to be used to designate the divine nature considered in itself, although only to the extent to which we can know it from its created effects: 'Thus the name "God" signifies the divine nature, for it was imposed to signify something that exists above all else, that is the principle of all things, and removed from all of them. For those who name God intend to signify all this' (ST I, q. 13, a. 8, ad 2).

What about (6) – the hermeneutic function of natural theology? Well, this is simply an obvious corollary of everything previously explained. Note the extreme broadness of the accounts of 'God' given by Aquinas in the recent quotes. He does not pretend to provide a definition of the concept of 'God' as understood in Christianity, not even as it generally features in what is usually called 'classical theism'. In fact, a few articles later, he writes that 'a pagan can take this name "God", when he says that "the idol is God", with the same meaning as the Catholic uses it in saying "the idol is not God"' (ST I, q. 13, a. 10, ad 5).<sup>14</sup>

Comparing this account with those used by more apologetically oriented natural theologians gives the impression that Aquinas is being excessively permissive. This is somehow correct; his difficulty is not to prove the existence of God, because he begins by assuming that almost any argument arriving at something loosely described as 'divine' can be legitimately called 'a demonstration of God'. While approach (1) – attributes/existence – typically presupposes a Christian account of God and then invests enormous efforts in proving His existence, the space employed in deploying the arguments for the existence of God in approach (2) – existence/attributes – is minimal compared to that used for his further development of divine attributes.

But this does not mean that the arguments for God's existence are a trivial matter for Aquinas. They fulfil a fundamental function within the whole treatise, not essentially apologetic but rather preliminary and architectonic. Aquinas uses the ways to lead us from a dark and vague idea of divinity towards a more precise and thoughtfully developed concept. He is using the conceptual apparatus of metaphysics to explain the causal action God has over creatures, through which the notion can properly be developed.

This is what is meant by (6) – the hermeneutic dimension of natural theology. The five ways are often given great importance as providers of a rational justification for religious belief in the existence of God, but this means reading them in the modern epistemological context, as if they were seeking to provide the believer with certainty about the existence of the Christian God through philosophical arguments. To understand the meaning these arguments should have for Aquinas, they must be read with their semantic and hermeneutic roles in mind. Of course, Aquinas considers them demonstrations of the truth of the proposition 'God exists', but their main function within the Thomist project is not to provide this rational certainty. It is rather about opening a path (*via*) to God, one that makes the very meaning of that word intelligible (and by doing so, also disclosing, in a limited and indirect way, the intelligibility of the divine reality referred by that word).

### **Why bother prove God's existence unless we grant the presumption of atheism?**

Many philosophers assume that demonstrations of God's existence must be driven by (7) – the apologetic function of natural theology – and therefore, a believer cannot seriously engage in them without implicitly accepting evidentialism and granting (3) – presumption

of atheism. We have seen that Aquinas does indeed accept (4) – the necessity of natural theology – and consequently, there is a sense in which Aquinas believes these demonstrations necessary. But his main concern is connected to (5) and (6) – the semantic and hermeneutic functions – and not with any alleged presumption of atheism.

Flew's argument works under the assumption that ST I, q. 2, a. 3, obj. 2 is 'suggesting, a century before Ockham, an appeal to an Ockhamist principle of postulational economy' (Flew (1972), 42). However, Ockham's razor does not compel us to presume that certain things should not exist if the opposite is unproven. The principle simply requires us to choose, between two possible accounts for a certain fact, the more economical one. Aquinas would have hardly conceived theism and atheism as rival accounts for the existence of finite beings. Rather, he believed that the only possible explanation for this fact is theism, and that one can only be an atheist by omitting the question from the very beginning. Which is why his answer to this objection limits itself to pointing out certain questions or aspects of nature that cannot be accounted for properly from an atheist perspective (see ST I, q. 2, a. 3, ad 2).

Nevertheless, we have shown that Aquinas seems to think indeed that an explanatorily superfluous God is not simply indemonstrable but must also be considered non-existent. This position is less connected with explanatory economy than with the theoretical nature of the concept in question. God is not a sensible object we can observe, but a cause we know of indirectly from its effects. Rather than a 'presumption of atheism', it is just that the meaningful content of the word 'God' cannot be grasped apart from its explanatory function. This does not imply any evidentialist claims regarding the justification of theistic beliefs but simply relates to Aquinas's ideas regarding the content and meaningfulness of such beliefs. Following John Jenkins, Aquinas can be read as holding that the articles of faith are epistemically basic, since they are not inferred from other propositions but rather accepted on divine authority. However, there are other beliefs that must be implicitly accepted in order to make sense of the articles of faith and accept them on divine authority (among them, belief of the existence of God). Jenkins says that Aquinas is better read as claiming that acceptance of such truths is a condition for giving basic assent to the articles of faith, but that the latter assent is not inferred from them.<sup>15</sup> Apologetics is out of place here; what really matters is (5) and (6) – the semantic and hermeneutic functions of natural theology.

Aquinas clearly denied the possibility of a direct knowledge of the divine essence in the natural order.<sup>16</sup> The argument developed here seems to imply that not only our natural knowledge of God, but also supernatural knowledge, at least during the present state of life, requires the hermeneutical horizon provided by natural theology. Of course, this does not mean that any believer should have an explicit knowledge of the arguments of natural theology or believe these to be completely demonstrative. It does imply, however, that she needs at least an elementary if confused intuition of them or must generally accept as plausible a worldview where God has some explanatory function. If this is so, an absolute failure of natural theology would entail a collapse of revealed theology, since once a metaphysical framework that makes God superfluous has been accepted as the only plausible account for the cosmos, there is no point evaluating the credibility of a hypothetical 'Revelation'. We cannot even interpret the meaning of such concepts as 'God' and 'Revelation'. Therefore, without the possibility of a natural knowledge of God, neither can there be a revealed one.

This problem can be seen in the puzzle that Aquinas raises when discussing the act of faith:

That God exists is something we ought to believe. But we cannot believe this because it is pleasing to God, since nobody can believe that something is pleasing to God



unless he already believes that there is a God to whom it is pleasing. Therefore, the judgment by which one thinks that God exists precedes the judgment by which it is believed that something is pleasing to God, and the latter cannot cause the former. (DV, q. 14 a. 9 obj. 9)

Aquinas's answer to this objection involves a previous, weaker judgement about the existence of God that precedes faith:

Someone can begin to believe something that was not previously believed but only held in a weaker manner. Therefore, it is possible that someone, before believing that God exists, might think that God exists and that it is pleasing to God to have him believe that He exists. And then, someone can believe that God exists because it is pleasing to God to believe so, even though God's existence is not an article of faith but rather something previous to the articles, since it can be proved by a rational demonstration. (DV, q. 14 a. 9 ad 9)

Still, it is also clear that Aquinas did not believe that whoever lacked arguments to prove the existence of God was unjustified in believing that God exists. Quite the opposite, he claimed that a person who ignores the philosophical demonstrations of the existence of God can still accept this fact by faith alone. Regarding this, we can consider his response to an objection that said the existence of God should be considered an article of faith and not an object of philosophical demonstration:

That God exists, and other things of this kind that can be known about God by natural reason, according to what is said in Romans 1, are not articles of faith, but rather preambles to the articles. For faith presupposes natural knowledge, as grace presupposes nature, and perfection supposes something that can be perfected. Nevertheless, there is nothing to prevent something that is itself demonstrable and knowable, from being accepted by someone, who cannot understand the demonstration, as a matter of faith. (ST I, q. 2, a. 2, ad 1)<sup>17</sup>

The text above is slightly odd, since Aquinas initially seems to affirm that faith presupposes the rational demonstrability of the existence of God (it is a 'preamble', some sort of necessary previous condition) then steps back, saying that effective knowledge of the demonstration is actually dispensable, since some people can accept the existence of God by faith alone. One way to make sense of this paradox is to claim that faith presupposes at least some vague understanding of the type of explanatory function that God fulfils towards creatures, but it is not essential for every believer to see how that explanatory framework can be developed philosophically and give rise to a full demonstration. Therefore, faith presupposes natural theology as a hermeneutic horizon that makes dogma intelligible, but this does not necessarily mean that theistic beliefs lack rational justification for someone who does not understand this explanatory horizon as a strict demonstration of the existence of God. It is simply that those lacking the philosophical horizon will have a more confused and rudimentary understanding of the truths believed. I take this to mean that (7) – the apologetic function – is possible but optional, while (5) and (6) – the semantic and hermeneutic functions – are necessary but can also be fulfilled in a very confused way.

This interpretation of the *preambula fidei* is also close to that suggested by Velecky (1994, 1–6), who sees them as an indispensable concurrent condition for the act of faith (just as removing the cork from the bottle is a prerequisite of drinking wine). This is so because some philosophical positions can block Christian faith, while others make it perfectly reasonable. Thus, faith has unavoidable philosophical presuppositions,

but it is not necessary for every individual believer to achieve these through rational demonstration. Some of Aquinas's texts even claim that it is by the very virtue of faith that persons can be inclined to give assent to the *preambula fidei*:

There are some things previous to faith, of which there is not faith unless *per accidens*. As long as they exceed the intellect of this human being but not of human beings as such, these things can be demonstrated and known. Such is the case of God's existence. Such things can also be believed by the persons whose intellect cannot grasp the demonstration, because faith, by itself, produces a sufficient inclination to believe whatever goes together with it, follows from it, or precedes it. (SSPL III, d. 24, q. 1, a. 2, *quaestiuncula 2*)<sup>18</sup>

Would it be unorthodox to argue that this inner inclination is also often providentially made easier by the fact that the believer lives in a community where these philosophical assumptions are commonly shared, and has been taught since youth to interpret reality through them? We will immediately see a text where Aquinas says that supernatural faith allows knowledge of those things about God that can be attained by natural reason to be '*communior*'. Socialization makes it easier for those who lack philosophical training to have a certain familiarity with the hermeneutic horizon presupposed by theism: A child receiving Christian instruction from infancy easily understands what is meant when we speak of 'God' because she is used to seeing and interpreting the world as created by Him.

This opens a final dimension of the problem we must not overlook. We should point out that Aquinas seems to think that semantic and hermeneutic mediation works in both directions: just as natural theology helps fix the referent for God and develop an intelligible account of divinity, supernatural faith sheds light on the meaning and intelligible content of natural theology. Accordingly, (5) and (6) – the semantic and hermeneutic functions of natural theology – must be complemented with this further statement:

- (9) *The hermeneutic function of faith*: Supernatural faith opens up a privileged perspective for elaborating the central insights of natural theology, enabling a more accurate assessment of the demonstrative power of the arguments for God's existence and a more rigorous conceptual account of 'God'.

Not only does rational inquiry result in a greater understanding of the truths believed by faith, but the light of faith also allows everyone a quicker and more refined penetration of these truths that were, in themselves, accessible to natural reason. At least from a psychological and cultural perspective, faith has provided an invaluable support for understanding the insights of natural theology, even though the demonstrative power of the arguments themselves does not depend directly on that. From the perspective of the individual believer who engages in natural theology, grace is not absent from the process that leads a Christian philosopher to embrace and elaborate the fundamental philosophical assumptions that make possible a rational demonstration of God's existence.<sup>19</sup>

In various texts, Aquinas says it was convenient that some truths accessible to natural reason were revealed, so that knowledge of them came to be quicker, more common, and less obscured by errors. For example:

It is necessary for human beings to receive as a matter of faith not only those things that exceed reason, but also those that could be known by reason. This is so for three reasons. Firstly, in order for people to arrive more quickly at the knowledge of truth about divine things: Since the science that proves the existence of God and other things regarding Him . . . presupposes many other sciences, so people would not

arrive at the knowledge of God until late in their life. Secondly, in order to make more common the knowledge of God: Because many people are unable to make progress in the study of sciences . . . and all these people would completely fail to know God unless divine things are presented to them as a matter of faith. Thirdly, for the sake of certitude: Because human reason is highly deficient regarding divine things, which is shown by the fact that philosophers, in their natural research of human affairs, made a lot of mistakes and held contradictory opinions. (ST II-IIae, q. 2, a. 4)<sup>20</sup>

Obviating (9) – the hermeneutic function of faith – is the main defect of (3) – the presumption of atheism. Picturing Aquinas as a prosecutor who presents sufficient evidence before the court of reason alone to overcome a presumption of atheism, settling once and forever the dispute between believers and unbelievers, exaggerates the exclusively philosophical character of the ways. The arguments in question never appeal to premises that must be accepted by the sole authority of Holy Scripture, but their philosophical elaboration and rational assessment have actually been made by a believer with cognitive faculties perfected by grace. Of course, it would be overly simplistic to react to critical rejections of the argument simply by saying that the objector has not received enough grace or is guiltily resisting it. Instead, criticism should be seriously considered and confronted with good philosophical reasoning. Even so, it would be *naïve* to assume that this discussion is a matter of pure rationality, unaffected by passion, existential stances, moral dispositions, and supernatural grace.

When it is said that God's existence is a truth accessible to natural reason, this does not have to be understood as an allusion to an abstract and completely decontextualized universal human rationality. It could instead indicate that rational people, whose cognitive faculties are always historically and culturally conditioned, can, if certain particular conditions are met, reach the rational certainty that God exists. This point is recurrent in Velevky, who also tries thus to save the dogma of the First Vatican Council, according to which we can know God from creatures with certainty.<sup>21</sup> Natural theology is a result of natural reason, but it is also to be expected to flourish best within a Christian culture of faith. Wherever the word 'God' and religious practice have been abandoned, interest in natural theology will probably decay and get entangled in numerous misunderstandings. For example, after a thorough revision of the relevant texts of Aristotle, Rocca (2004, 199–254) concludes that, despite Aquinas's charitable interpretation, the natural theology of Greek philosophers had not truly recognized God the creator as a universal cause of being for contingent entities. It was not from the philosophers but from biblical revelation that Aquinas learned that. But of course, the fact that Christian revelation was needed for philosophers to achieve this truth does not mean it cannot be proven by philosophy.

This article has primarily underlined the direction marked by (5) and (6) – the semantic and hermeneutic function of natural theology – because it is more properly philosophical. The complementary direction (9) – the hermeneutic function of faith – is rather a theological issue. Still, it must be considered in order to avoid a naive and unilateral view of the problem. Taking this dimension into account will lead us to see a religious believer's engagement in natural theology as a speculative circle: philosophical argument clarifies the presuppositions of supernatural faith, whereas supernatural faith grants the believer a previous intuitive understanding of the arguments and guides its rational elaboration. Without this, a full development of natural theology would be highly difficult to achieve (but not impossible from the perspective of philosophical rationality as such). Therefore, the presumption of atheism is not only unnecessary but also unrealistic and even potentially harmful for natural theology. I am not saying that faith and philosophical thought require each other in such a way that, in theory, the arguments could not be successfully elaborated unless we begin by a presumption of theism. But a fruitful discussion does not require the opposite presumption to be embraced. Existentially speaking,

previous belief in God helps make the argument stronger, even from the perspective of philosophical reason as such.

## Conclusion

Aquinas states that human beings cannot have an immediate knowledge of God during the present life, instead knowing God indirectly, from creatures, as long as their existence can only be fully explained by appealing to Him. This means that the starting point for an account of God is the causal action He exercises over the world, and therefore, the study of divine attributes is conditioned by a previous study of the arguments from which we come to know the existence of God.<sup>22</sup> These arguments fulfil a semantic and hermeneutic function, and, for this reason, natural theology is a crucial enterprise for believers.

Although it is a language alien to Aquinas's texts, talking about a hermeneutic and semantic function may help us to understand the way he and many other medieval authors approached natural theology. The relationship between rational argumentation and the authority of faith is not that the former adds independent evidence that strengthens a supposed precarious epistemic position of the latter. Rather, the medievals resort to philosophy to deepen the meaning that should be afforded to revealed truths; they try to interpret and express the dogma intelligibly rather than justify it. This is why Aquinas feels no shame in combining Christian and pagan sources in his discussion; his main objective is not to identify certain truths about God that could be established completely outside Revelation, thus replacing, as far as possible, mere faith by rational knowledge. Rather, he seeks to provide, through philosophical argumentation, a deeper penetration into the meaning that should be given to the truths of faith. Natural theology does not primarily aspire to a greater justification of our beliefs, but rather a greater intelligibility of them.

Proofs of God's existence are essential to theism, but this has nothing to do with a 'presumption of atheism' that should be defeated by resorting to purely rational evidence. Neither is there a methodological requirement of beginning by making the theistic concept of 'God' coherent and later turning to discuss whether the concept can have application. Moreover, there are good reasons to begin the discussion by using proofs of God's existence as a device to fix the referent for the word 'God', and later on giving an account of divine attributes strongly rooted in God's explanatory role towards creation.

**Acknowledgements.** I am especially grateful to Professors Juan Eduardo Carreño, Rafael Simián, Daniel Contreras, and María Isabel Lemaitre for their attentive critical reading and suggestions on earlier drafts of this work. I am also grateful for the incisive and timely suggestions of anonymous reviewers, which helped to improve the text considerably. The insights and comments of participants of the philosophy of religion conference at Pontificia Universidad Católica in September 2021 were also very helpful for the final draft.

**Financial support.** The research for this article was supported by a grant of the John Templeton Foundation project 61559-2, 'Supporting Constructive Research on the Existence of God in Spanish-Speaking Latin America'. It was also carried out in the context of the author's Master's studies, which were funded by the Government of Chile through ANID's scholarships programmes and through the Fondecyt initiation project no. 11180640.

## Notes

1. For example, see Mann (2005); Murray and Rea (2008); Taliaferro et al. (2010); Wainwright (2005).
2. For example, see Garrigou-Lagrange (1977) and (1976); González (2008); González Álvarez (1963); Pérez De Laborda (2015).
3. All quotations from Aquinas are based on the text available at <http://www.corpusthomicum.org>. Translations are mine, done with assistance from the editions mentioned in the references list. Some abbreviations common in the literature are used ('ST' for *Summa Theologiae* (Aquinas (2012a), (2012b)), 'SCG' for *Summa contra Gentiles* (Aquinas (2018)), 'SSPL' for *Scriptum Super Libros Sententiarum Magistri Petri Lombardi*, 'DV' for

*Quaestiones Disputatae De Veritate*, 'SBDT' for *Super Boethium De Trinitate*, 'CT' for '*Compendium Theologiae*', Roman numerals with uppercases for the part or book of a work, 'q' for *quaestio*, 'a' for *articulus*, 'obj' for *obiectio*, 'ad' for the response to objections, 'c' for chapters, 'd' for '*distinctio*').

4. For example, see Kenny (2003), which was rightfully criticized for this very reason by Velecky (1994, 68–95). Kerr (2002, 52–54) suggests that this apologetic approach is more dominant in Anglo-Saxon literature. However, it is not completely absent in major works of the French Thomism of the twentieth century, such as the above-mentioned treatise by Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, subtitled 'A Thomist solution to agnostic antinomies'.

5. This 'humbleness' is better understood if we realize that the semantic and hermeneutic functions of which we talk here do not require the arguments of natural theology to be strict scientific demonstrations. For example, a strong inference to the best explanation can work just as well. Of course, Aquinas did believe his arguments were demonstrations, but it is not obvious that the whole project of theology will fall apart if we just take them to be very good probable arguments in favour of a true proposition. Further elaboration on this point would force me to go in detail into how are we to understand the dogma of the Vatican I council regarding the certainty of our natural knowledge of God, and in turn to deal with more general epistemological disputes about what are we to understand by 'knowledge' and 'certainty', but space precludes that.

6. Flew actually concludes his paper with an artificial reconstruction of q. 2, a. 3, obj. 1 as a problem concerning the logical coherence of theism but acknowledges that the original formulation of the objection in *ST* 'is perhaps slightly awkward for present purposes' (Flew (1972), 45).

7. Regarding this, see for example *ST* I, q.12 a.4, where Aquinas summarizes these general lines of his theory of human knowledge precisely in the context of the discussion of our knowledge of God.

8. Are there any exceptions to this? When considering (8), we must not overlook the qualifications 'natural' and 'during the present life state': Aquinas does defend the possibility of a direct vision of divine essence in the after-life, granted by the assistance of a special grace he calls '*lumen gloriae*' (*ST* I, q. 13, aa. 1, 2, 5, and 11). He also admits, for some very exceptional cases reported in Scripture (especially Saint Paul and Moses), the possibility of God granting someone an anticipated and transitory vision of His essence (*ST* II-IIae, q. 175, a. 3). But none of this reflects the normal situation of human beings in the present life state.

9. Of course, Aristotle is not saying that *quia* demonstrations are invalid syllogisms, but just that they are not demonstrative or scientific syllogisms, because the premises do not fulfil the conditions put forward in chapter 2 of the *Posterior Analytics* (71b20).

10. The same objection is considered and answered similarly in *SCG* I, c. 12.

11. This way of relating the spontaneous knowledge of God ordinary people have with the rigorous conceptualization of the philosophical itineraries that take us from the creatures to their Creator is frequent in authors of Thomistic inspiration. See, for example, Ferrer (2001, 157–161); González (2008, 25–26); Romera (2008, 108–119); Pérez De Laborda (2015, 10–12).

12. For further development on the idea that the relevant nominal definitions here are those provided by the ways themselves, see Huneus (2022); Twetten (2007) and (2005).

13. This text assumes an etymology by John Damascene that figures in the first objection of the article.

14. Aquinas says, however, that this commonality in meaning is not properly univocity but rather analogy: 'Both meanings of the name are different, but one of them is included in the other: Hence it is clear that this is said analogically' (*ST* I, q. 13, a. 10). He also states that this analogy is grounded in the possibility of a natural knowledge of God; otherwise, it would be impossible to give the name any meaning at all: 'But if there were somebody who did not know God at all, this person could not name Him, unless perhaps as when we utter names the meaning of which we ignore' (*ST* I, q. 13, a. 10, ad5).

15. See Jenkins (1997, 197–202).

16. In note 7, I also pointed out some exceptions, related to the view of divine essence by the blessed in the afterlife, and also during the present life state in very exceptional cases. Through these experiences, someone may achieve a precise knowledge of the divine essence without the hermeneutic mediation of natural theology here defended, but even so, it is unclear how this person could realize later that she had had a vision of the essence of what is commonly called 'God' unless following the natural and rational itinerary to God. In any case, it seems implausible to claim that the meaning of the word 'God' has been fixed through such unusual experiences. So, even if these situations eventually grant some people a knowledge of God that does not require (6) – the hermeneutic function of natural theology – natural theology will still be necessary regarding (5) – the semantic function of natural theology. More precisely, what should happen in these cases is that (6) will be strongly outweighed by a correlative hermeneutic mediation that goes in the opposite direction. That is, whoever has such a view of God will interpret normal talk about divinity in the light of such an experience, rather than adjusting and interpreting his or her beliefs about God from the perspective of what natural reason can tell us about God's existence and attributes.

17. On this point, also see *ST* I, q. 1, a. 2 and II-IIae, q. 4, a. 8, DV, q. 14, a. 9 ad 8.

18. On this point, see also *SSPL* III, d. 24, q. 1, a. 3, ad 1.

19. Eugene Rogers emphasizes this non-rationalistic aspect of Thomistic natural theology by bringing up the commentary of Aquinas to the Epistle to the Romans. Although I believe Rogers' interpretation is somewhat forcing the argument to bring Aquinas' position closer to the fideism of Karl Barth, many of his remarks are certainly correct (see Rogers (1996)).
20. In a similar sense, see SCG I, c. 4.
21. '*Deum rerum omnium principium et finem, naturali humani rationis lumine e rebus creati certo cognosci posse*' (God, beginning and end of all things, can be known with certainty from creatures through the light of natural human reason) (DH, 3024 and 3026). However, Velevy seems to lean excessively towards fideistic relativism, considering it unfortunate that the language of the council fathers suggested that the only intellectually correct philosophy is the one that enables this demonstration. See Velevy (1994, 28–33).
22. I think this picture fits well with the approach that Kvanvig (2021 and 2020) has recently called 'Creator Theology', though in his perspective, this approach does not necessarily require our account of the divine attributes to be guided by the results of rational demonstrations of God's existence.

## References

- Aquinas T (2012a) *Summa Theologiae. Prima Pars, 1–49*. Green Bay, WI: Aquinas Institute.
- Aquinas T (2012b) *Summa Theologiae. Secunda Secundae, 1–91*. Green Bay, WI: Aquinas Institute.
- Aquinas T (2018) *Summa Contra Gentiles. Books I–II*. Green Bay, WI: Aquinas Institute.
- Burrell DB (1979) *Aquinas. God and Action*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Ferrer J (2001) *Filosofía de la religión*. Madrid: Palabra.
- Flew A (1972) The presumption of atheism. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 2, 29–46.
- Flew A (2005) *God and Philosophy*. New York: Prometheus Books.
- Garrigou-Lagrange R (1976) *Dios: su existencia*. Madrid: Palabra.
- Garrigou-Lagrange R (1977) *Dios: su naturaleza*. Madrid: Palabra.
- González Ál (2008) *Teología Natural*, 6th edn. Pamplona: EUNSA.
- González Álvarez Á (1963) *Tratado de Metafísica: Teología Natural*. Madrid: Gredos.
- Huneeus C (2022) Triplex via and the 'gap problem' with cosmological arguments. *New Blackfriars* 103, 536–553.
- Jenkins J (1997) *Knowledge and Faith in Thomas Aquinas*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kenny A (2003) *The Five Ways: St Thomas Aquinas' Proofs of God's Existence*. New York: Routledge.
- Kerr F (2002) *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Kvanvig JL (2020) Anselmian adversities. *Religious Studies* 56, 318–332.
- Kvanvig JL (2021) Metatheology and the ontology of divinity. In Kittle S and Gasser G (eds), *The Divine Nature*. New York: Routledge, pp. 138–157.
- Mann WE (ed.) (2005) *The Blackwell Guide to the Philosophy of Religion*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Murray MJ and Rea MC (2008) *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pérez De Laborda M (2015) *Dios a la vista: el conocimiento natural de lo divino*. Madrid: Rialp.
- Rocca G (2004) *Speaking the Incomprehensible God. Thomas Aquinas on the Interplay of Positive and Negative Theology*. Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press.
- Rogers EF (1996) Thomas and Barth in convergence on Romans 1? *Modern Theology* 12, 57–84.
- Romera L (2008) *El hombre ante el misterio de Dios. Curso de teología natural*. Madrid: Palabra.
- Taliaferro C, Draper P and Quinn PL (eds) (2010) *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, 2nd edn. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Te Velde R (2006) *Aquinas on God: The 'Divine Science' of the Summa Theologiae*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Twetten DB (2005) Aquinas Aristotelian and Dionisian definition of God. *The Thomist* 69, 203–250.
- Twetten DB (2007) To which 'God' must a proof of God's existence conclude for Aquinas? In Houser RE (ed.), *Laudemos Viro Gloriosos. Essays in Honor of Armand Maurer*, CSB. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, pp. 146–183.
- Velevy L (1974) 'The five ways'—proofs of God's existence? *The Monist* 58, 36–51.
- Velevy L (1994) *Aquinas' Five Arguments in the Summa Theologiae 1a 2, 3*. Kampen: Kok.
- Wainwright WJ (ed.) (2005) *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Wolterstorff N (1986) The migration of theistic arguments: from natural theology to evidentialist apologetics. In Audi R and Wainwright WJ (eds), *Rationality, Religious Belief and Moral Commitment. New Essays in the Philosophy of Religion*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, pp. 38–81.

**Cite this article:** Huneeus C (2023). The functions of natural theology in Thomas Aquinas: A presumption of atheism? *Religious Studies* 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412523000616>